Origen and Irenaeus on Infant Baptism and Baptismal Regeneration…Again

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In a previous article, I quoted Origen equating baptism with circumcision.

Note: This article was written before the author's conversion to Orthodoxy.

The quotation is as follows:

*For if the containment of evil which circumcision **signifies** is not matched by the works of faith, it is regarded as a form of wickedness. Even in the church, if someone is **"circumcised" by the grace of baptism** and he becomes a transgressor of the law of Christ, the circumcision of baptism is reckoned to him as uncircumcision, because faith without works is dead…Circumcision was of no value to those who thought they could be justified by it* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament VI, Romans, p. 76).

Here, we can see that circumcision signifies an internal reality rather than accomplishes it and that baptism is an equivalent. Baptism requires a repentant heart and it is useless to those who partake in it without works of repentance.

Obviously, such ideas appear to contradict that Roman Catholic view that baptism justifies a man. After all, circumcision, and implicitly baptism, are of no value to those who think they can be justified by it.

However, upon further reading of Origen, I find such a view to be incomplete. Let me quote him on the same topic in two different spots:

*Every soul that is born into flesh is soiled by the filth of wickedness and sin. . . . In the Church, baptism is given **for** the remission of sins, and, according to the usage of the Church, baptism is given even to infants. If there were nothing in infants which required the remission of sins and nothing in them pertinent to forgiveness, the grace of baptism would seem superfluous* (*Homilies on Leviticus* 8:3 [A.D. 248]).

The Church received from the apostles the tradition of giving baptism even to infants. The apostles, to whom were committed the secrets of the divine sacraments, knew there are in everyone innate strains of [original] sin, which must be washed away through water and the Spirit (*Commentaries on Romans* 5:9 [A.D. 248]).

Origen's thought appears to show an evolution from what Justin Martyr's and Irenaeus' explicitly wrote on baptism, because they wrote that baptism signifies repentance. We can see in the initial quotation Origen maintained some of the trappings of their thought, but it appears that he has gone beyond it into baptismal regeneration territory.

However, we need to read what he wrote without presuppositions and ask a few questions:

- Does the text say that *all* infants should be baptized, or that only sick infants were baptized? Augustine also wrote of the universal custom of baptizing infants, but he himself and a friend who were both brought up in Christian households were not baptized as infants. So, in what sense was this custom universal? Augustine was almost baptized at the age of seven when he was very ill and likewise his friend when he was 18. In fact, while we have quite a few Church Fathers who had grown up in Christian households we have *no recorded evidence* that any of them were baptized as children. In fact, we have a few notable examples such as Ambrose and Jerome who were baptized as adults even though they had Christian parents.
- Further, what was the efficacy of baptizing these infants? Was it to actually to save them from damnation from original sin per chance they die? Or, did the baptism signify something in that it was a visual testimony that these infants needed forgiveness for sins?

Allow me to make the case that what Origen was possibly talking about here was the practice of baptizing infants as a visual testimony instead of the waters actually being the means in which the forgiveness of sins is accomplished.

Why do this? It helps make sense of Origen's thought across all of his quotations (being that is is unlikely, though not impossible, for Origen to contradict himself within the same commentary.)

To help us understand the merits of this case, let's dig a little more into Irenaeus's view of baptism in *On the Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*:

*Since then faith is the perpetuation of our salvation, we must needs [sic] bestow much pains on the **maintenance** thereof, in order that we may have a true comprehension of the things that are. Now faith occasions **this** for us; even as the Elders*, the disciples of the Apostles, have handed down to us. First of all it bids us bear in mind that **we have received baptism for the remission of sins**, in the name of God the Father, and in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was incarnate and died and rose again, and in the Holy Spirit of God. And that **this** baptism is the seal of eternal life* (Chapter 3).

*This tradition comes from the Elders, and not the Apostles, which would show that Irenaeus understood it to be an extra-biblical interpretation of an Apostolic practice (and not an Apostolic interpretation passed down to the Elders.)

The continued existence of faith ("maintenance thereof") is needed for salvation. Faith gives the occasion for "*this*…" *This* is baptism. Hence, faith gives one the occasion to receive baptism for the remissions of sins. Clearly, this sounds like baptism literally forgives sins, but this *may* be an overly literal understanding of the language.

For example, John the Baptist states, "I baptize you with water **for** repentance" (Matt 3:11). Does the baptism create repentance?

Mark 1:4 records, "John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of **repentance for the forgiveness of sins**."

As Irenaeus wrote in *Against Heresies* Chapter 21:2, "[T]he baptism of John was proclaimed with **a view** to repentance." Hence, we can see that the baptism was for repentance in that the baptism was a visual demonstration of repentance and the repentance forgave sins.

So, when Peter said, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38), it is not entirely clear that the baptism itself forgives sins. The only real connection we can make is that just as those who were baptized by John had repented and the water did not literally cause that repentance, those baptized into Christ by Peter had received forgiveness of their sins by their faith without the water literally causing that faith (or forgiveness for that matter).

Let's get back to Irenaeus. Baptism is a "seal of eternal life" according to Irenaeus in that it a visible sign of the God who confers eternal life onto believers:

And for this reason the baptism of our regeneration proceeds through these three points: God the Father bestowing on us regeneration through His Son by the Holy Spirit. For as many as carry (in them) the Spirit of God are led to the Word, that is to the Son; and the Son brings them to the Father; and the Father causes them to possess incorruption. Without the Spirit it is not possible to behold the Word of God, nor without the Son can any draw near to the Father: for the knowledge of the Father is the Son, and the knowledge of the Son of God is through the Holy Spirit; and, according to the good pleasure of the Father, the Son ministers and dispenses the Spirit to whomsoever the Father wills and as He wills (Chapter 7).

One possesses "incorupption" (i.e. forgiveness) by beholding (i.e. faith in) the Son, which is only possible by the drawing of the Father and the enabling of the Holy Spirit. Oddly enough, nowhere does it say the water is when this happens or causes it to happen. Rather, that baptismal rite done with Tridentine formula portrays publicly precisely how the believer is saved. In short, baptism visually presents forgiveness and how it happens in the Godhead, it does not actually confer forgiveness.

So, just as Abraham "received the sign of circumcision, a seal [i.e. "mark"] of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised" (Rom 4:11), Christians receive the seal of baptism. As Irenaeus details, it is a mark of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who Christians had faith in when unbaptized.

Now, I am very well aware I might be over-analyzing both Origen and Irenaeus on these respective matters. However, being that such an understanding is both Biblically consistent and consistent with other things the authors have written, it merits consideration.

Further, it also shows how the traditional view of baptismal regeneration could have very easily been inferred by those who could not import the meaning of what was being portrayed in the sacrament onto the literal language of forgiveness, just as Paul did with circumcision in Rom 4:11 and John did with his baptisms. The result is that the baptism which Origen thought cannot justify men is now thought to be the means which most men are initially justified, and hence justification must be an even that is repeated (as it is a state that can be lost after infancy).

Being that most Protestants do not interact with the Church Fathers on this issue, neither I nor most Catholics ever hear any explanations of what most of the Fathers were talking about in their "baptismal regeneration quotations." Hopefully, what I provided here shows that what they wrote may need to be

nuanced and not necessarily interpreted the traditional way.

Original Link:
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